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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 003238

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/27/2031

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SUBJECT: KEY BRV ADVISOR ON UNSC RACE, POSSIBLE CABINET
CHANGES

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Classified By: Ambassador W.R. Brownfield for reason 1.4 (b)

Summary

¶1. (C) Ambassador and DCM met on October 27 with Rene Arreaza of the vice president's office, about our only reliable contact within the BRV. Arreaza said that the BRV had concluded it could not win a UNSC seat, and so was aiming at a seat-sharing arrangement with Guatemala. This would be an unfortunate outcome for us. Arreaza predicted wholesale changes in the cabinet after the election, with VP Rangel and FM Maduro almost certain to move on. He identified former FM Ali Rodriguez and VFM Jorge Valero as the most likely candidates to replace them, respectively. If Rangel goes, Arreaza -- who we count on in virtually every operational arena, from drugs to visas to providing insights on the government and the Chavez campaign -- is likely to move on as well. That could result in a further reduction in our already puny access to the BRV. Arreaza said that the Calderon team had sent an emissary to set the stage for restoring Mexico-Venezuela relations at the ambassadorial level, following Calderon's inauguration, and Arreaza viewed that as likely to happen. End summary.

¶2. (C) Ambassador and DCM met with Rene Arreaza, chief of staff to Vice President Rangel, on October 27. Arreaza is the only BRV official with whom we can have regular contact, and serves as a reliable transmission belt for messages to and from the Bolivarian government.

Sharing the UNSC Seat

¶3. (C) Arreaza was eager to discuss the latest on the UNSC election standoff between Venezuela and Guatemala. He said that Chavez is running the show and making all decisions for the BRV on this issue. FM Maduro is merely the gofer. Chavez has concluded that the BRV cannot get the necessary votes to win the seat outright. For that reason, the BRV has explored other possible GRULAC consensus candidates. None are viable. The GOG will not accept Bolivia, the BRV's preferred choice; Argentina will not accept Uruguay; the GOG will not accept the Dominican Republic; and both Costa Rica and Panama are uninterested. Chavez has therefore decided that the solution is to split the seat with Guatemala. Under this scheme, Guatemala gets the first year; Venezuela gets the second. Arreaza thought this solution would probably

produce consensus in GRULAC.

¶4. (C) Arreaza said that Guatemalan FM Rosenthal proposed to go to both Cuba and Venezuela this weekend to discuss the UNSC impasse. Here in Venezuela, he would have sought to meet with Chavez, VP Rangel, and FM Maduro. However, the BRV waved him off, concluding that a five day cooling off period was best at this point.

¶5. (C) Wary of the seat-splitting "solution," the Ambassador suggested that the scheme of electing two governments to one year terms sounded overly complicated and might require the General Assembly to change rules and procedures. Arreaza said the BRV had "consulted with the UN Secretariat" and learned that the rules would permit this to

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be decided by a 2/3 majority.

¶6. (C) Comment: This play has a decided ring of truth to it, and it's likely this reflects Chavez, thinking right now. Chavez is trying to pull victory from the jaws of defeat; by forcing us to swallow the BRV on the UNSC, even for a single year, he can declare victory over the "Empire." Alternatively, if we are seen as blocking GRULAC consensus on this issue, he'll seek to spotlight our intransigence, and put the blame for his defeat on us. It would be unfortunate if the GOG were to be attracted by this solution. End comment.

Post-election Cabinet Changes?

¶7. (C) Arreaza said he expected considerable rotation in the cabinet after the December 3 elections. (He viewed it a foregone conclusion that Chavez would be re-elected.) Arreaza noted that Chavez loves to make changes in the cabinet to keep people off-balance; he did not rule out a clean sweep, changing literally every government minister. VP Rangel, closing in on 80 years of age and afflicted with

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constant colds, was making plans to leave the government after the election. Arreaza did not repeat the most often-heard rumor about Rangel, that he'd seek a retirement post as Ambassador to Chile (his wife is Chilean). Arreaza suggested that former FM, and current Ambassador to Cuba, Ali Rodriguez might now be best positioned to replace Rangel. (The vice president is elected by the National Assembly, not popular vote.) Rodriguez had been plagued with poor health as foreign minister, including prostate cancer and complications from a leg amputation, but he'd recently been given an encouraging report after a full checkup in Europe. Rodriguez was unhappy with the smaller arena of being Ambassador, and was looking forward to coming back to Venezuela.

¶8. (C) Arreaza repeated what we've heard from him and others, that FM Maduro is very likely to be sacked after the election. Somewhat gleefully, career diplomat Arreaza predicted that the inner circle of advisors Maduro had brought from the National Assembly would all be expelled back to that body once Maduro left. Arreaza said that word of Maduro's fate was confirmed in his view when Chavez referred to the foreign minister as "Nicolas el Breve" (Nicolas the Brief). Arreaza said that Chavez was already vetting potential replacements for Maduro, and current VFM Jorge Valero was in the running. Chavez believes Valero has a good grasp on the bilateral relationship with the United States.

¶9. (C) In what struck us as something of a surprise, Arreaza predicted that UN Permrep Francisco Arias Cardenas might come back to take a cabinet post. Arias Cardenas likely will not be able to fulfill his mission of winning Venezuela a UNSC seat, and Arias' devastating televised 2001 critique of Chavez as a murderous coup plotter would seem to

weigh against him winning another position of high authority.

Mexico

¶10. (C) Arreaza said that the BRV had received some feelers from the incoming Calderon team about the possibility of re-establishing relations at the ambassadorial level, once Calderon is inaugurated. No rapprochement is possible with Fox as president, but given Calderon's outreach, Arreaza was reasonably confident that relations could be normalized after December. (Note: Mexican Charge Escalante had separately confirmed to us that a Calderon emissary visited Caracas last week to lay the groundwork for the return of ambassadors. Nonetheless, Escalante said that Calderon had no illusions about the possibility of establishing a productive relationship with Chavez.)

Comment

¶11. (C) As always, Arreaza is a good conveyer belt to and from the BRV, when he wants to be. Unfortunately for us, we count on him in virtually every operational arena, from drugs to visas to providing insights on the government and the Chavez campaign. If Rangel goes, Arreaza is likely to move on. That could result in a reduction of our already puny access to the BRV.

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